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Tips for Teaching Phonological Awareness

What Is Phonological Awareness?

Phonological awareness is the ability to hear sounds that make up words in spoken language. This includes recognizing words that rhyme, deciding whether words begin or end with the same sounds, understanding that sounds can be manipulated to create new words, and separating words into their individual sounds.

Phonological awareness is not the same as phonics. Phonics deals with the relationship between sounds and the letters that represent those sounds. Phonological awareness deals with the sounds in the words and not the letters.

Phonological Awareness Tasks

A. Rhyme

One of the easiest phonological awareness tasks is working with rhyming words. There are three stages of difficulty in working with rhyme: hearing words that rhyme; discriminating rhyme, which involves picking out words that rhyme from a list of words; and producing rhyme, which involves naming words that rhyme with a given word. The following examples show the difference in these tasks.

1. Hearing Rhyme

T: Listen to this sentence: *Jack and Jill went up the hill*. Say it with me.

T and C: *Jack and Jill went up the hill*.

T: Listen to these words: *Jill, hill*. These words rhyme because they have the same sound at the end: *ill*. Say the words with me.

T and C: *Jill, hill*.

T: Great! Now I'm going to say another sentence. I will have you repeat the sentence and then tell me which two words in the sentence rhyme. Are you ready? OK, listen carefully: *We have fun in the sun*. Now you say the sentence and tell me the rhyming words.

C: *We have fun in the sun: fun, sun*.

T: Good listening!

2. Differentiating Rhyme

T: Listen carefully to these three words: *boy, toy, car*. One word doesn't have the same ending sound. *Boy* and *toy* end the same way: *oy*. But *car* doesn't end the same, so it doesn't belong with *boy* and *toy*. Now I'm going to say three more words and I want you to tell me which word doesn't belong: *man, hat, fan*.

C: *Fan?*

T: No, let's listen again: *man, hat, fan*. Which one doesn't belong?

C: *Hat!*

T: You're right! Good job.

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3. Producing Rhyme

T: Tell me a word that rhymes with *sit*.

C: *Fit*.

T: Yes, very good. Now tell me a word that rhymes with *play*.

C: *Day*.

T: I'm going to say a sentence and I want you to tell me the missing word. I'm looking for a rhyming word. Ready? *I have a cat who's very _____. Tell me the missing word.*

C: *Fat*.

T: Good!

B. Isolating and Categorizing Sounds

As children become more familiar with sounds, they can begin to identify individual sounds in words. The first step is to be able to recognize initial sounds, then final sounds, and then medial sounds. After they learn to isolate sounds, they can move on to generating words that begin or end with a specified sound.

Practice should first focus on continuous consonant sounds or sounds that can be extended, for example, /nnnn/ or /mmmm/. Vowel sounds, whether long or short, can be extended as you say the sounds in a word: /mmmm/ /aaaa/ /nnnn/. Continuous sounds are: /f, l, m, n, r, s, z, sh/. Stop sounds are more difficult because these sounds cannot be extended. Stop sounds are: /b, k, d, g, h, p, t, v, w/. To emphasize these sounds in a word, you can repeat the sound several times, for example, /t-t-t-t/ /a/ /n/: *tan*. Be careful not to distort these stop sounds by adding a vowel sound, for example, do not say /buh/ when making the sound of the letter b. When working with sounds, always say the sound of the letter, not its name, for example, say /mmm/ and not *em*.

The following examples use initial sounds, but can also be used with final sounds and, eventually, medial sounds.

1. Recognizing Sounds

T: I want you to listen as I say some words. I want you to tell me what sound the words start with. Ready? Here we go: *mmman, mmmouse, mmmoon*.

C: /m/

T: Yes, that's right.

2. Differentiating Sounds

T: I want you to listen as I say three words. One word starts with a different sound than the other two words. O.K., listen carefully: *rrrat, rrrain, mmman*. Did you hear that *rrrat* and *rrrain* start the same, and *mmman* starts with a different sound? O.K. Now I'm going to say three more words and I want you to tell me which word starts with a different sound. Here we go: *sssit, mmmat, sssun*.

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C: *Mat.*

T: That's right!

3. Generating Sounds

T: Listen while I say this word: *find*. I can think of another word that starts with the same sound: *fan*. Both *find* and *fan* start with /f/. Now you tell me a word that starts with /f/.

C: *Funny.*

T: Great! Can you tell me a word that starts with /m/?

C. Blending and Segmenting Syllables and Sounds

Once children have experience with isolating individual sounds, they can move on to the more difficult task of blending and segmenting sounds in a word. Segmenting involves breaking words into their syllables and, at the more difficult level, words into their individual sounds. For example, the word *cat* has three sounds, *said* has three sounds, *go* has two sounds, etc. Segmenting also involves separating a sentence into its individual words.

Begin with segmenting sentences into individual words and words into their syllables, which are easier for children to segment. Then move to segmenting a word into its onset and rime. This means separating the word into two parts—its initial sound (onset) and its final part (rime). In the word *pan*, for example, /p/ is the onset and /an/ is the rime. Finally, have the child segment individual phonemes (sounds) in a word, for example, /p/ /a/ /n/. When segmenting sounds, pause one second between each sound. To highlight the sounds as you segment them, extend all the sounds except stop sounds, for example, /p/ /aaa/ /nnn/.

Blending is the opposite of segmenting. Rather than separating a word into its individual sounds, it involves combining the individual sounds to say a whole word. For example, /mmm/ /aaa/ /p/ is blended to make *map*.

1. Blending Syllables

T: I'm going to say three parts of a word. I want you to say the whole word. Are you ready?
Listen: oc/to/pus. What's the word? (Tutor pauses one second between each syllable.)

C: *Octopus.*

2. Blending Onset and Rime

T: Listen to these two parts of a word: /p/ /ig/. I can blend the parts together to say the whole word: *pig*. Now I want you to listen to some word parts and tell me the word: /d/ /uck/.
(Tutor pauses between saying the onset and the rime.)

C: ummm

T: That's O.K. Listen again. Ready? /d/ /uck/

C: *Duck.*

T: There you go. I knew you could do it.

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3. Blending Phonemes

T: I am going to say a word but I am going to separate the word into its sounds. I want you to see if you can figure out what the word is. Are you ready? Listen to these sounds: /r/ /a/ /n/. What's the word? (Tutor pauses one second between each sound)

C: *Ran.*

T: Excellent. I can't trick you, can I? Now try this word: /r/ /ī/ /d/.

C: *Ride.*

T: Very good.

4. Segmenting Words in a Sentence

T: I am going to say a sentence. I want you to clap for each word you hear in the sentence. I'll say the sentence slowly. Are you ready? Listen carefully and count: *I see a big dog.*

C: (Child claps for each word five times. Repeat the sentence, and clap with the child if necessary.)

5. Segmenting Syllables

T: I'm going to say a word and clap for each syllable I hear in the word. Watch and listen: mon/key (Tutor pauses one second between each syllable and claps twice). Now you clap with me.

T and C: (both clap while tutor says the syllables: mon/key)

T: Now I will say some words. I want you to clap for each syllable you hear. Are you ready? Here's the first word: Sat/ur/day.

C: (Child claps three times.)

6. Segmenting Onset and Rime

T: I can divide the word *hand* into two parts, the first sound and the rest of the word. Listen: *hand*: /h/ /and/. Now you try it. (Tutor pauses about one second between saying onset and the rime)

C: /h/....(child falters)

T: (after waiting three seconds) That's O.K. Listen to the word again and then try to separate it into its two parts: *hand*.

C: /h/ /and/

T: That's perfect. Now let's try separating some other words into their two sounds.

7. Segmenting Phonemes

T: Listen to this word: *fish*. I hear three sounds in *fish*: /f/ /i/ /sh/. Now listen to this word and tell me how many sounds you hear: *cake*.

C: Two sounds.

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T: Are you sure? Listen again: *cake*.

C: Three sounds.

T: That's right. Can you tell me the sounds?

C: /k/ /ā/ /k/

T: You're really getting good at this, aren't you?

Manipulating Phonemes (Sounds)

Manipulating sounds is a more difficult task and can be difficult even for some children in second grade. Usually these types of tasks begin in mid-grade one. Manipulating sounds requires the child to replace sounds in words with other sounds to create new words. Begin with manipulating initial sounds, then final sounds, and finally, medial sounds.

1. Manipulating Initial Sounds

T: I can make a new word from the word *pan* if I change the /p/ at the beginning of *pan* to /m/. I can make the word *man*. This is pretty tricky. Can you try to make a new word now? What word can you make if you take away the /m/ at the beginning of the word *man* and replace it with /t/?

C: *Tan*.

T: Very good.

2. Manipulating Final Sounds

T: Listen to this word: *cat*. I can make a new word by changing the ending sound. If I change the /t/ at the end of *cat* to /p/, I can make the word *cap*. Now I want you to make a new word. Change the /p/ at the end of *cap* to /n/.

C: *Can*.

T: That's right!

3. Manipulating Medial Sounds

T: Listen to this word: *set*. What sound do you hear in the middle of *set*?

C: /e/

T: Right. Now let's change the /e/ sound to /a/. What is the word now?

C: *Sat*.

T: Yes. Now change the /a/ in *sat* to /i/. What is the word now?

C: *Sit*.

T: Very good!